

Van der Bijl N RG-50.028.0061.01.02 and RG-50.028.0061.02.02

Summary of Interview

Gijsbertus Nicholaas Van der Bijl was born on August 25, 1914, in Rotterdam, Holland. Mother: Gwenelia Maria Libor born November 13, 1890. Father: Marianaas Van der Bijl born April 8, 1879. Sisters: Reyta and Maria Gwenelia. Brothers: Marinaas and Gwenelaas.

After completing his schooling, Gijsbertus worked making decorative pictures in silver and copper for about four years before becoming a sailor with the Holland America Line in 1935. Gijsbertus' parents were members of the Protestant church, so Gijsbertus would pray to God for a safe journey when he embarked on a trip. Gijsbertus had been a Communist in his youth and followed the developing political situations with interest, but he stopped following the Communist party by the time he was 18 years old. Before World War II began, Gijsbertus no longer felt safe at sea, so he took a job at a restaurant, where he met one of Jehovah's Witnesses. The Witness visited Gijsbertus at home, and he and his father listened to recorded talks on Bible subjects by Joseph F. Rutherford, played on a phonograph. Gijsbertus was impressed that the Witness was able to answer his questions from the Bible, and he started to attend the meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses. By April 1940, Gijsbertus was sharing his newfound faith with others and distributing Witness literature to refugees of the war between Russia and Finland.

At that time, there were about 500 of Jehovah's Witnesses in Holland who were actively sharing their faith with others. By then, Rotterdam was being bombed by the German army, but the Witnesses continued their preaching activity. Gijsbertus left his job at the restaurant and took up preaching full-time spending around 150 hours a month doing Bible educational work. On May 10, 1940, Germany invaded Holland and some of Jehovah's Witnesses were arrested. Gijsbertus was arrested on February 20, 1941, while he was preaching. He was given the option to be freed if he signed a document stating that he would no longer distribute literature of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. Gijsbertus was taken into custody after he said that he would not sign 'even if he was offered two million guilders' to do so. He along with another Witness were later transferred to Scheveningen, a Gestapo prison. After being questioned and beaten, Gijsbertus was put into solitary confinement. Prisoners were given bread, potatoes, coffee, and tea. They were allowed outside for about 50 minutes a day for fresh air. Gijsbertus was happy to be given a Bible, and he wrote out verses from the book of Psalms to place above the door to his cell.

Gijsbertus was transferred out of the penitentiary after three months and taken to a prison in Dusseldorf before being sent to Berlin by train along with political and criminal prisoners. Shortly thereafter, he was taken by train to Sachsenhausen, then transported by truck in a group of 20 to 30 other prisoners to the Sachsenhausen Oranienburg concentration camp.

After having his hair shaved off and being given prison clothing and wooden shoes, Gijsbertus was sent to the barrack set aside for prisoners who were Jehovah's Witnesses. The Witnesses secretly held meetings on Sunday afternoons. They had talks on Bible subjects and studied *Watchtower* magazines that had been smuggled into the camp.

At first, Gijsbertus was not given a work assignment but, rather, was required to stand at attention in front of the barrack all day long with only a break for lunch. Later, for about 18 months, Gijsbertus was assigned to cut trees in the forest for timber. Afterward, he was assigned to the clothing department where he worked with other Witnesses for the remainder of his time in the concentration

camp. While in the clothing department, Gijsbertus was pleased to be given permission to shower two or three times a week because of working with the clothes of the SS.

At the daily roll call, if a prisoner was to be punished with 25 lashes for some misdemeanor, all other prisoners were required to watch. Other times they saw prisoners being hanged with their hands tied behind their back until they either died or their bodies were broken from the mistreatment. Eventually, hundreds of prisoners of war were brought into the camp. Many of them were so malnourished that Gijsbertus heard that some of them resorted to cannibalism, eating the flesh of dead prisoners. Many Russian prisoners died from the mistreatment in the camp; for example, they had to walk naked to and from the shower during the winter. From time to time, Jehovah's Witnesses were offered the opportunity to be freed if they would sign a document renouncing their faith, but this did not interest Gijsbertus at all. Because he would not sign this document, Gijsbertus was only allowed to write a five-line letter once a month to his parents.

As the Russians approached Berlin, the concentration camp was evacuated. The Witnesses stayed together as they left the camp on the death march, even taking very sick Witness prisoners with them so that they would not be left behind with the other sick prisoners who were not being evacuated. The Witnesses put the sick men on a cart loaded with valuables belonging to the SS. After several days of walking and sleeping outdoors, they were very hungry with nothing to eat. Gijsbertus had a tube of toothpaste and would put small amounts in his mouth to quell his hunger as he walked. On the last night, they found themselves in a forest where they could hear the guns of the approaching Russians. The SS guards drank until they were drunk and fell asleep. The Witnesses prayed to Jehovah God for guidance as to what they should do. In the early morning, the Witnesses decided to escape into the forest, and they met the American military who liberated them. The tables were turned when Gijsbertus saw that the SS chief of the camp was now a prisoner of the American military. The former prisoners were cared for and given food and identity cards. The Canadian military brought Gijsbertus to Nijmegen on the border with Holland where he boarded a truck going to Rotterdam.

After the war, Gijsbertus continued to share his faith full-time. He cared for a congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses as a congregation servant and later travelled caring for the needs of a group of congregations as a circuit servant. Gijsbertus was then invited to attend Gilead School in South Lansing, New York, U.S.A., to be trained as a missionary. He graduated in February 1949 and was assigned by Nathan H. Knorr, president of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, as a circuit servant in the states of Illinois and Indiana, U.S.A. He was later assigned to Belgium where he married Justine, a Witness woman of Yugoslavian background. After their marriage, they both continued to serve full-time in the Bible education work of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Gijsbertus shows documents which entitled him to a government pension because of having been in the concentration camp. He also has the first letter that he sent to his parents from prison in July 1941.

Looking back over his life, Gijsbertus feels happy that he never compromised his faith nor even considered doing so. Both he and Justine feel it is a privilege to work with people, helping them become good citizens and also become Jehovah's Witnesses. Gijsbertus and Justine are happy that they are able to serve their God Jehovah in this way and hope to continue their work as long as their health permits.

Keywords

Scheveningen penitentiary
Jehovah's Witnesses literature
Jehovah's Witnesses phonograph
Jehovah's Witnesses recorded talks
Jehovah's Witnesses literature – Watchtower magazine
Sachsenhausen Oranienburg concentration camp
Watchtower Bible and Tract Society
Knorr, Nathan H.
Rutherford, Joseph F.